

Advocates demand justice for Erika Rocha, call attention to abuses and escalating suicide crisis in California women's prison

April 25 2016

California Coalition for Women Prisoners

Erika Rocha was 35 years old and one day away from her Youth Parole Hearing on April 15, 2016 when she committed suicide at the California Institution for Women (CIW) in Corona. Since her death, the suicide crisis at CIW has only worsened. Erika was 14 years old when she was charged as an adult in LA County. As a Latina youth, she was [43% more likely](#) to be tried as an adult. Interrogated by police and prosecutors and threatened with a double life sentence for attempted murder, she pled to 19 to Life. Erika was 16 years old when she was sent to state prison in Chowchilla. Prison staff placed her in solitary to "protect her" until she was 17, but she told CCWP that guards admitted they kept her there to protect the prison because she was too young to legally be there.

At the time of her death, Erika was serving her 21st year of incarceration. She suffered from deplorable treatment for mental health issues attributable to her incarceration as a youth, including at least four indefinite terms of 2-3 years each in solitary confinement. Erika sought support for her mental health and trauma throughout her incarceration. CCWP continues to gather information, but we know that in the weeks before her death, Erika was transferred to suicide watch at least three times. The day before her death, she was released from suicide watch and placed in a mental health unit.

In 2015, the [suicide rate at CIW](#) was more than eight times the national rate for people in women's prisons and more than five times the rate for all California prisons. In January 2016, a court-ordered suicide prevention audit concluded that CIW "continued to be a problematic institution that exhibited numerous poor practices in the area of suicide prevention."

We are very concerned about the conditions that led to Erika's death, as well as its impacts on the escalating crisis at CIW. In the week since Erika's death, another suicide was reported and at least 22 more people transferred to suicide watch. The suicide watch unit is overcrowded and CIW is placing people on "overflow" in the SHU ("Security Housing Unit"). Given extensive documentation of the [harmful impacts of solitary confinement on mental health](#), CIW's decision to place people in crisis in solitary shows a continued failure to properly address its extremely high suicide rates. People experiencing mental health crisis in prison need intensive support, but CIW is instead endangering their lives further by placing them in solitary confinement.

CCWP Program Coordinator, Windy Click, who met Erika in prison when she was 19, said, "Erika was always seeking help, she was lost inside an adult facility not knowing what the future held. When she asked for help they didn't bother to help her." Upon hearing the news of Erika's suicide, a friend of Erika's who was also sent to state prison at 16, said "Erika's death is a

painful example of how the criminal justice system is broken and therefore breaks people. They did this to her. She obviously couldn't see any future for herself.”

We hold the State of California, the California Department of Corrections & Rehabilitation (CDCR) and the California Institution for Women (CIW) responsible for Erika's death.

Erika had a devastating story to tell about the abuses she suffered in the custody of the State of California. She hoped to be involved in youth justice work once she was released.

Despite decades of lawsuits to remedy prison health care and court orders to reduce prison overcrowding, the ongoing inhumane conditions lead to tragic and untimely deaths. To reverse the crisis at CIW, CCWP calls for the following immediate actions:

- *Conduct a full investigation* into the ongoing crisis and high suicide rate at CIW. We ask the California Legislature to order the Office of the Inspector General to take action immediately.
- *Increase oversight* by the court-ordered Special Master on the CDCR's ongoing failure to improve conditions for people receiving mental health treatment at CIW.
- *End CIW policies and practices that deny people access to lifesaving support* on suicide watch. Provide people safe access to mail, phone calls, legal visits, social visits, and the Compassionate Companions peer support team. Isolating people in mental health crisis and denying them access to available support increases their chance of death.

In honor of Erika, we ask that supporters of youth justice:

- *Donate* to help Erika's family raise money for her services: <http://bit.ly/ErikaRocha>
- *Sign the petition* to demand investigation into suicide epidemic at CIW Women's Prison in California: <http://bit.ly/InvestigateCIW>
- *Sign & circulate* [The Public Safety & Rehabilitation Act of 2016](#) ballot initiative eliminating the power of prosecutors to direct file youth under the age of 18 into adult court.
- *Support SB 1052 (Lara)* requiring that youth under 18 have legal access before interrogation and ensures that youth cannot waive their Miranda rights.
- *Support SB 1143 (Leno)* to severely limit youth solitary, including room confinement.
- *Stay updated & share* on social media using #ErikaRocha #EndSolitary #YouthJustice

As President Barack Obama wrote earlier this year about Kalief Browder's suicide post-incarceration, "How can we subject prisoners to unnecessary solitary confinement, knowing its effects, and then expect them to return to our communities as whole people?"

We are devastated and enraged that we did not get the opportunity to welcome Erika Rocha back into our communities. We demand justice for Erika and an end to the suicide epidemic CIW has created for its most vulnerable people inside.